What appears below is the text and footnotes from the Introduction to *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pages 3-7.

Introduction

This is a study of how other animals have been viewed in the Buddhist and Christian religious traditions. At first glance, providing an account of these traditions' views, or indeed of the larger subject "religion and animals," may seem a relatively simple task. Upon examination, however, the topic swells into a multitude of diverse issues, a number of which are extraordinarily complex.

Some of the complexities stem directly from the well-known fact that both the Buddhist and Christian traditions are far from monolithic. It is a commonplace among comparative religion scholars, for example, that each of these traditions is extraordinarily internally diverse. Upon even a cursory examination, one finds that, over the millennia of their existence, these traditions have provided an astonishing array of views and materials, some of which are in significant tension with each other. Since such diversity leads to challenging problems on virtually any subject that believers, scholars and other interested parties might explore, it also affects significantly many issues that arise when one seeks to describe each tradition's views of animals.

A very different set of complexities arises from the fact that the category "animals" is also well described as "internally diverse." In other words, the living beings included when we use the generalization "animals," however it is defined, can be startlingly different from one another. Many are mentally, socially, and individually very simple, but others are so complicated and enigmatic mentally and socially that we may not have the ability to understand their lives well. Indeed, as pointed out in this study, at times various animals are so different from one another that failure to use some description other than the generalization "animals" risks crass oversimplification and profoundly inaccurate descriptions.

A third and equally decisive factor that complicates our approach to the awe-inspiring complexity and diversity of problems we collect under the rubric “religion and animals” is something altogether closer to home. This is the fact that our most familiar ways of talking about “animals,” are, upon careful examination, coarse caricatures. As will be discussed below, these familiar patterns of speaking often mislead in the extreme because they are dramatic oversimplifications of the realities that we seek to describe and otherwise engage when inquiring about the “animals” side of “religion and animals” topics.

Given the difficulties that our everyday and even scholarly habits of discourse involve when we try to talk about religion and/or animals, some care is in order when considering just what we might say about the rich intersection of religious and animal issues. For example, though they will likely seem somewhat awkward at first, the terms “other animals” and “nonhuman animals” are frequently used in this work as a reminder that the prevailing uses of the term “animals” have some very unusual features. “Animals” in contemporary English usage, as in many other familiar languages, usually means, of course, only “all animals other than humans.” What makes this use peculiar, from one vantage point at least, is the fact that virtually every speaker of English is also familiar with uses of “animals” that include humans. Whenever, for example, someone restates verbatim Aristotle’s claim that “man is the only animal who has the gift of speech,”[1] listeners aren’t surprised in the least by reference to humans as animals.

The coexistence of these two conflicting senses of “animals” reflects our general awareness of connections between all animals, human and otherwise, even as many value systems, and certainly the dominant ones in the developed world, emphasize the special role that human animals have so often accorded themselves on this planet. Thus, even though use of the term “animals” for members of the human species is, by and large, uncontroversial, reliance on phrases such as “human animals” and “nonhuman animals” disturbs some readers because they perceive the recurring phrase to signal an agenda, if you will. What is not noticed so readily is that the more common use, as in the phrase “humans and animals,” also advances an agenda or worldview. In fact, the phrase “humans and animals” is so commonly used that its underlying agenda or meta-message—that humans are distinct from all other animals—is not easily noticed even though the phrase is, logically, a problem (this is discussed in Chapter Five).

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[1] Aristotle 1984, *Politics* I, 2, 1253a 9–11, page 1988.

In order to get beyond the caricature, impoverishment, and stilted conceptualization that reliance on any single discipline, vocabulary scheme, tradition of speaking, or, to use the phrase common in this study, “tradition of discourse” would threaten, this study uses an interdisciplinary approach. This combination of different orientations, concerns and vocabularies is used to help identify and organize problems, assisting the reader in a survey of the different kinds of limitations and issues involved in assessing Buddhist and Christian views of other animals. Thus, certain words, concepts and perspectives developed outside of these two religious traditions, as well as outside the academic fields which have been involved in the study of religious phenomena, are used for the purpose of identifying and then clarifying features of the prevailing attitudes towards animals.

In Part I, “Religion and Speciesism,” the cumulative and internally diverse nature of religious traditions, as it is relevant to an examination of views of nonhuman animals, is addressed (Chapter One). In Chapter Two, the concept “speciesism” is introduced as an interpretative tool. Richard Ryder coined the word in 1970, and since then the noun “speciesism” and the adjective “speciesist” have come to be used widely, though by no means universally.

Chapter Two surveys the history of the concept by evaluating various uses by philosophers and others who clearly value the term. An examination of these various uses, however, shows that many different concepts have been called “speciesism.” Likewise, many facile, inadequate definitions of the term have been offered.

After an examination of the context in which the term was originally used and some of the purposes for which it was coined, I suggest a “working definition” to be used as a tool in assessing early views found in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. This definition has been designed to meet some of the objections to various criticisms of the term’s use. Interestingly, even though the term has received significant play in certain philosophical circles, the discussion has been inconsistent. A review of contexts in which the term appears, whether philosophical, journalistic, theological, or the context of activism, shows that the word has often been used without definition, and that even when definitions have been offered they have not been rigorous or carefully tied to the term’s origin as a challenge to a particular type of exclusion. Such facile uses of the word out of context have led some critics to assert that no valid concept called “speciesism” can be framed.

Chapter Three examines several prominent philosophers’ criticisms in detail. An analysis of the limitations of the concept reveals that the concept is not a panacea. It also reveals, however, that some features of the term’s use are quite valuable, even if limited in scope. Of some note is the fact that various critics’ ploy of holding poor definitions and overreaching uses of “speciesism” to be representative of the whole range of concepts and uses to which the term can be put is itself a rhetorical approach not justified by careful examination. Even if careful examination of some uses of “speciesism” and “speciesist” reveals various shortcomings, then, there remain uniquely valuable uses for a carefully drawn definition of speciesism. In particular, Ryder’s original critique of the exclusion of all nonhuman animals from centrally important moral protections, referred to below as “the anti-speciesism critique,” is a valuable tool. It permits one to identify certain features of some common approaches to determining which living beings should matter to informed moral agents. Part I thus concludes that while some uses of the term are inexcusably vague, there are valuable uses of the term that make it a helpful and valid tool for identifying and assessing the rationale for various claims made in the early Buddhist and Christian traditions.

Part II takes a very different tack, turning first to what is known about specific, distinctive nonhuman animals. Chapter Four is an examination of information about some other animals that has been developed in highly specialized biological sciences. Chapter Five is an examination of certain reasoning and discourse habits that characterize statements found not only in the early Buddhist and Christian materials, but also in contemporary societies of the developed world. Throughout this chapter, various features of more rigorous reasoning and careful discourse are proposed. The chapter also includes the argument that any attempt to address the substance and implications of the ways in which the Buddhist and Christian traditions addressed other animals cannot be successful if one focuses solely on views held about the general category “other animals.” In addition, one needs to focus on what was said about certain specific nonhuman animals. Further, for the reasons stated in Part II, the animals used as representatives of nonhuman animals’ abilities must not be poor representatives, but, rather, the more complicated, so to speak, of nonhuman animals. Thus, this study seeks to assess the ways in which early Buddhists and Christians saw or dealt with the more complicated biological individuals outside the human species, such as other great apes,[2] elephants, and whales and dolphins (called the “key animals” or “key species”).

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[2] “Other great apes” is used because humans are, biologically speaking, great apes, there being

Parts III and IV are, respectively, reviews of the Buddhist Pali Canon and Christian materials. Chapter Six reviews those portions of the ancient collection of Buddhist texts known as the Pali Canon. Focusing on the vocabulary used in these texts, Chapter Six argues that the manner of reference to nonhuman animals reveals (1) some important negative attitudes and (2) a persistent refusal to investigate.

Chapter Seven evaluates the common view that the Buddhist tradition is sensitive to nonhuman animals, and concludes that this claim is often overstated in a way that misleads. In fact, as shown in Chapter Seven, the tradition has a very ambivalent view of existence as a nonhuman animal, one element of which is very derisive and dismissive of the realities of nonhuman animals. Part III concludes that a rigorous concept of speciesism is helpful in identifying certain important features of the early Buddhists’ views of nonhuman animals. More specifically, the early Buddhists, and in important ways the entire tradition in reliance on the foundational insights appearing in early strata of the tradition, characteristically held mere membership in the human species to be an achievement of a moral nature. A corollary of this claim was that mere membership in the human species was such an elevated status that members of the human species were rightfully entitled to benefit from practices that were obviously harmful to some other animals. Thus, uses of even the most complicated nonhuman animals, such as elephants, were deemed to be humans’ prerogatives under the moral order even when such uses clearly harmed the nonhuman individuals.

Part IV focuses first on Old and New Testament views of other animals, and then on

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“no natural category that includes chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans but excludes humans” (R. Dawkins 1993, 82).

those general views as they were worked out by major post-biblical theologians through Augustine (Chapter Eight). The method used here is examination of the Hebrew terms found in texts of the Hebrew Bible that the Christians inherited as the Old Testament, and an examination of the Greek and Latin words used by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine of Hippo, as well as various words found in the Septuagint and Vulgate.

Chapter 9 provides an assessment of early Christians' views, and concentrates on the notions of dominion, sacrifice, and the narrowing of the rich and sometimes contradictory values regarding nonhuman animals that were part of the Hebrew view of the surrounding world inherited by the early Christians. In summary, the early tradition established a view regarding humans and other animals that still operates for many Christians today. This claim is that each and every member of the human species, by virtue of species membership alone, has a special ontological status relative to other animals. Further, not only is this special status unlike that of any other animal, it is also qualitatively better. It is this last feature in particular that provides the foundation for the claim that it is eminently moral to assert that the interests of any human animal quite properly prevail in virtually any nontrivial circumstance over the interests of any other animal.

Both Part III and Part IV conclude with observations about problems and advantages of using "speciesism" as a concept that illuminates features of how these traditions have come to understand the place of other animals. Note, however, that even if one does conclude that either of these traditions, or any other religious or ethical tradition for that matter, has had attitudes illuminated by the definition of speciesism used in this study, such a conclusion is logically distinct from the very different claim that humans, either as individual moral agents or as members of a larger community, do not have special powers and/or responsibilities. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Two, the view of morality implicit in the critique of alleged speciesism, at least as that critique is framed here, affirms in many respects the claim that humans have special abilities to care about “others,” whether they be human or otherwise. Further, as noted in both Parts III and IV, one can find approaches within both traditions that clearly do not fit the description “speciesist.”[3]

The questions, then, that drive this study are these: (1) What are the prevailing attitudes about other animals in the Buddhist and Christian traditions? (2) How helpful is the concept of speciesism in understanding such attitudes?

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[3] For example, certain *bodhisattva* and Christological formulations.